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THE TEST WE MUST MEET¹

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As teachers of English we must not be insensible of the new spirit that is pervading educational thought. We have abandoned the faculty psychology; mental discipline is measured in terms of habit; culture is, in Matthew Arnold's words, the ability to see things as they are to the extremely practical end that reason and the will of God may prevail. What my experience teaches or what conclusions I may draw from my *a priori* theories are of very little consequence: we are approaching the era of scientific measurement of results, and this new spirit in education is asking us some very practical questions about our results. We have been experimenting in method for about twenty years; we have defined and redefined our aims; we have been given a larger and larger place in the curriculum—what have we to show for it? No longer can we answer with generalities to which no one can take exception, concerning the desirability of a command of accurate, forceful, and lucid expression, or the esthetic and ethical value of a knowledge of good literature. We must be ready to prove that our pupils have made reasonable progress in the art of expression and that they show evidence of their literary discrimination in the books and periodicals that they read of their own volition.

One test of our results will come, of course, as in the past, from the colleges, but their test is likely to be much the easiest of all to meet because it is so largely formal and examinational. We shall probably continue to be unduly conscious of their criticisms, and as a result we shall probably continue to use methods of questionable value in preparing our pupils for the real test. Gradually, however, this evil is diminishing, because we are coming to see that college preparation is only an incidental part of our work, and because

¹ A paper read before the National Council of Teachers of English at Philadelphia, February 28, 1913.

the colleges themselves are emerging from the academic shades and monastic cloisters that have so long obscured their view of the problems of economic, political, and social progress which our pupils must attack.

The test that will really measure the value of our work will not appear in the entrance examination books of the colleges, nor in our pupils' reports of excellent attainments in college classes, nor in the poems and magazine articles that they write. It will be no dress-parade of their monographic millinery, but their everyday habit of effective and respectable English.

Within the last half-dozen years it has dawned upon teachers of English that man is a talking animal. Along with other practical considerations we have come to realize that the demand for reasonably accurate oral speech is much larger than for written expression. Available oral language resources are heavy assets against the emergency liabilities of everyday life. Slowly we have grasped the relation between this outstanding truth and the duty of the school. At last we are giving pupils a chance to talk in school as they must, by some shift, learn to talk after leaving school. With a definite problem, namely, to convey to the listeners something that they must get straight in order to make their own next move, the young student feels the compelling power of the spoken word or gets the reaction from its blundering use. Into this oral attainment enter the elements of enunciation, modulation, tone, pitch—in a word everything comprehended in the term elocution as rescued from the Curfew-Shall-Not-Ring-Tonight fiend.

This everyday habit must affect written expression as well. We have been working at this longer, and probably we are meeting the test better—at least we have discovered a good many things not to do. A few years ago we were industriously rehashing the cadavers of the books on the prescribed list and as surely establishing in the minds of our pupils a list of proscribed books and authors. We were inscribing red-ink trespass-signs upon square rods of wastebasket scenery and indelible crow's-feet and acidulous droops on our own faces. We were distending monosyllabic ideas into galleys of *-osity* and *-ation* by our demands for 400 words on "What I See in George Eliot's Face." Isn't it true that we have now

learned in both oral and written composition that the surest sources of interest and the greatest possibilities of growth lie in the pupil's saying or writing as he will all his life something that he really wants to say or write? Our problem, then, is to discover individual interests, to correlate with these interests in all of the other subjects of the school, through this correlation to enlist the assistance of other members of the faculty, and to develop in our pupils the best possible habits of oral and written expression.

How well will our pupils write? Not very well to be sure. Particularly where we must try to denature the language of the street and the immigrant home we shall always find it hard to meet the business man's requirement that his clerk shall make the president of the Browning Club envious and that his stenographer shall eradicate all of his own dictated barbarisms. But the progress of the race always puts somebody at a Sisyphus task, and we can console ourselves that our rock never rolls quite to the bottom. If our expense of time and money is to be justified, however, our boys and girls must show up better in the business man's test than their compeers whom *he* has been teaching the same number of years.

If we are to meet the test of improving the habitual use of English in speech and writing, it will be necessary to do more than hand back laboriously marked themes. We must work with the pupil in conference. He must attack problems of expression in the same spirit with which he attacks problems in mathematics. We do not ask him to find the coefficient of a to the n without assistance and then red-ink his results. We work out the formula with him. In the science laboratory, also, we direct his effort, and school boards and principals have conceded that additional help is necessary for this laboratory work. Are the number of vibrations of the C-pitch pipe or the laws of falling bodies more important than the habitual use of good English? I believe that the most important practical consideration for securing better conditions for teaching English is to prove to superintendents, principals, and schoolboards that English composition is a laboratory subject, and that it requires additional help as much as does science.

Let me describe briefly a laboratory method that has been found successful in high-school English. This plan is not ideal, but it is

a possible step toward the larger allotment of teaching-time to this subject. The standard requirement for a teacher in the school where this plan is in use is twenty-five periods of class instruction per week. In this experiment teachers of English are assigned twenty periods as class instructors and five periods as laboratory assistants. The ground has been prepared for a definite assignment by the regular class teacher. The actual writing is done in class, and while it is being done the two teachers, the regular teacher, and the visiting laboratory assistant go from pupil to pupil, helping each to see the problems and to solve them. Suggestions and corrections thus made are available for immediate use, and these suggestions meet individual difficulties. The pupil's point of view is changed. He discovers that composition is not guesswork but telling the truth; he sees the problem nature of composition, and learns the use of the principles of his textbook and of the suggestions of the teacher. He and his teacher gain a personal touch and fellowship that are mutually valuable. He begins to realize two things: first, that revision of written work is possible and interesting; second, that it is imperative. Young people, and sometimes older ones, have an impression that writing comes by the grace of God—a man writes well by gift, just as he has blue eyes or six feet of length. You may tell about the laborious studies of Stevenson or the endless blotting of Tennyson's lines, and the boy pays the tribute of a passing wonder—no more. If he sits with his teacher and together they struggle over a contrary sentence that must be made to say the thing he set out to make it say, he gets an illumination. Under this method the careless pupil realizes the keen satisfaction that comes from a conquered difficulty. A something that may be called the workman's conscience stirs within him and stands a fair chance of growth. Such a boy or girl will be far more likely to meet the demands of the business man's test than the student who has passively lamented the inadequacy of his returned paper on Milton's minor poems. Incidentally, a pupil is in the way to develop some appreciation of that elusive and indefinable essence that we call style, for now he sees the value of word and phrase in the simple exercise which reflects his own thought.

No plan, of course, can abolish all reviewing of papers, but this one will very materially reduce it by giving the assistance which prevents rather than corrects the error. The teacher's vitality and good humor in class are worth far more than any number of corrections—indeed I think that we should probably agree that marked papers not followed up in conference are of questionable value.

If we are to meet the tests that the public and, incidentally, the superintendents and principals impose upon our teaching of literature, we must not send our pupils out with a "never again" for the great classics we have dissected. Tradition has protected us for a long time, but we must all recognize that tradition is traveling a jolty road to the junk heap. Those charged with the expenditure of public money for education have a perfect right to ask what our pupils read after they leave us, what kind of theaters they attend. It is of no particular value that they know the stories of Shylock, Macbeth, Caesar, King Arthur, and Ivanhoe. Neither have the classifications of lyric and ballad, iambus and trochee, romance and realism, nor knowledge of Shakespeare's dark lady, nor Milton's marital misfortunes, nor Scott's lame leg, nor Pope's crooked spine any saving qualities. Has the literature of the school become a savor of life unto life, a nourisher of the spirit, a narcotic of nobler ideas and emotions? Unless we can reach the essential life at a deeper level than a mere show-window display of literary tinsel, we had better spend our time with the new social science and the new social interpretation of history and of physical science that are destined to play so large a part in the education of the next decade.

We are asking for better conditions for teaching English. We believe that we have a claim that the public must honor. We insist that the arguments of those who maintain that a study of the ancient classics is better training in English than the direct study of English is beside the mark, because we are now teaching hundreds of thousands of pupils who have neither the desire nor the ability to study the ancient classics. But while we demand recognition of our difficulties in the revolutionized character of our high schools, we must ourselves recognize the reasonableness of the public demand that we meet a fair test of results.